

Running Head: THE VIRTUE GAP IN HUMOR

The virtue gap in humor: Exploring benevolent and corrective humor

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## Reference

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## Abstract

The recent emergence of positive psychology gave rise to the idea to conceptualize humor from a “good character” perspective (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Present constructs, however, show a “virtue gap”, and the two concepts of benevolent and corrective humor were developed to fill this gap. The former describes a humorous outlook on life that entails the realistic observations and understanding of human weaknesses (and the imperfection of the world) but also their benevolent humorous treatment. By contrast, corrective humor involves moral based ridicule; that is, the use of mockery to fight badness and mediocrity. Corrective humor, akin to satire, uses wit to ridicule vices, follies, abuses, and shortcomings with the intent of shaming individuals and groups into improvement. Participants ( $N = 340$ ) filled in statements assessing the two virtue-related humor concepts, general sense of humor (subsample of  $n = 144$ ), mockery, and 24 character strengths. As expected, benevolent humor showed positive correlations with most of the 24 character strengths, and uniquely related to the strengths of several virtues (justice, temperance, and transcendence) beyond general sense of humor. Corrective humor related most strongly to strengths of the virtues wisdom, courage, and justice, especially once mockery was controlled for. Thus, both constructs capture important virtue-related humor aspects over and above the sense of humor and mockery and are thus suitable for—at least partially—filling the “virtue gap” in humor research. They have the potential to pave the way for developing and investigating further humor constructs that meaningfully relate to strengths and virtues.

*Keywords:* benevolent and corrective humor, sense of humor, positive psychology, character strengths and virtues

## The virtue gap in humor: Exploring benevolent and corrective humor

**Introduction**

The recent emergence of positive psychology gave rise to the idea to conceptualize humor from a “good character” perspective (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Prior approaches to the sense of humor typically did not emphasize the morally good. For example, two approaches do emphasize positive and well-being components, but they do not include the morally good. Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir (2003) suggest that affiliative humor and self-enhancing humor styles are beneficial and aggressive and self-defeating humor styles are potentially detrimental to well-being. McGhee (1999) sees the sense of humor to be composed of six components, namely enjoyment of humor, verbal humor, laughter, humor in everyday life, laughing at yourself, and humor under stress. While some of these components are predictive of positive outcomes for the individual, they are not explicitly morally valued in itself, not to speak of being virtuous. In these conceptualizations, humor helps dealing with personal stress, but it does not do good to others.

What is the evidence for virtues in humor? There is evidence from both etymological studies and some current research. Regarding the former, Schmidt-Hidding (1963) pointed out for several languages (German, English, and Spanish) that there were many transitions in the meaning of the term *humor*. The rise of humanism brought a significant shift, inasmuch as *humor* acquired its positive—versus formerly neutral—meaning. Moralists distinguished between “true” and “false” wit, as they did between “good” and “bad” humor. A term became necessary for the *humanitarian*, *tolerant*, and *benevolent* forms of laughter, and that expression was found in *good humour*, later *humour* alone. During this epoch there was a gradual shift from sheer *ability* (a talent of ridicule, wit, or humor) to make others laugh to a *virtue* of sense of humor. One should not poke fun at those who are simply different, but it was permissible to laugh at the pompous, the unreal, the faked, the conceited, and so on.

Gradually a concept of the sense of humor emerged that contained other elements such as being able to laugh at one's misfortunes or one's own expense. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, humor became a cardinal virtue in England, joining others such as *common sense*, *tolerance*, and *compromise*. Later, the term underwent a philosophical twist, and next to an outlook on life also Sigmund Freud (1928) added a psychological perspective by conceptualizing humor as a mature defense mechanism. Thus, this historical development extended the scope of what we study today beyond the more natural categories of *creation* and *appreciation* of the ridiculous to a third domain, one in which humor is seen as virtuous or good.

Not much research dealt with humor as a virtue. Morreall (2011) lists a catalog of virtues that are linked to humor. Another line of research utilized the six ubiquitous virtues identified by Peterson and Seligman (2004) as a reference. Evidence for humor serving the virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence were studied at the level of items of humor scales (Beermann & Ruch, 2009a) and in reports of everyday behaviors where participants actually used humor when acting virtuously (Beermann & Ruch, 2009b). In addition, character strengths and virtues were correlated with a variety of humor instruments (Müller & Ruch, 2011). The outcome was that humor was compatible with all six virtues but most frequently it was aligned with humanity and wisdom. For example, Beermann and Ruch (2009b) developed a humor in virtues questionnaire that entails ratings on (a) the importance of the six virtues, (b) the frequency with which each of the virtues is employed humorously, (c) actual or imaginary situations in which a virtue was shown humorously. Wisdom and humanity had the highest frequency (i.e., they were estimated to be employed humorously in 42–47% of situations, with the average being 34.8% across all six virtues). Regarding the type of humor shown in the specific situations (rated along Schmidt-Hidding's eight comic styles), humor was numerically shown most often in

the virtues wisdom, courage, humanity and transcendence, and satire in the virtues courage and justice.

### **Benevolent and Corrective Humor: Two Styles Aiming at the Good**

As seen in the above, there obviously is a gap between current conceptualizations of the sense of humor as a personality trait (or “positive” and “negative” humor styles), and virtue-related forms of humor (morally “good” vs. “bad”). The latter are needed, as the concept of the sense of humor was shaped by both humanism and philosophy after originating in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We propose to pick out benevolent and corrective humor for the psychological study. Benevolent humor refers to a humorous outlook on life entailing the realistic observations and understanding of human weaknesses and the imperfection of the world but also its acceptance and a non-critical and benevolent humorous treatment. Corrective humor involves moral-based ridicule; that is, the use of mockery to fight badness and mediocrity. Corrective humor uses wit to ridicule vices, follies, abuses, and shortcomings with the intent of shaming individuals and groups into improvement. Both have their origin in humanism as described above. Benevolent humor is not hurting or excluding anyone. And to laugh at the pompous, the faked, and the conceited may be a means to better them and to establish justice and fairness (corrective humor).

These two are selected for several reasons. First, they aim for the good and their emergence in history is well documented and related to establishing virtue in the field of humor. Second, they have a prominent place in linguistic analysis without having been discovered by psychology yet. Schmidt-Hidding (1963) structured the field of the funny/comic by studying the frequency of humor-related words in the English language. He identified four “key terms” (most frequent terms), which are surrounded by less frequent satellite terms, namely humor, fun, wit, and mock/ridicule. Relevant for the present study, he differentiated humor from other forms of the funny and suggested that humor is based on a

“sympathetic heart” and mock/ridicule might be based on either the pleasure of mockery but also on a moral critique. It is the latter that is relevant for corrective humor. Third, clear descriptions of the prime characteristics exist that make them different from other forms of the comic. Schmidt-Hidding (1963) derived eight comic styles (*wit, irony, fun, humor, nonsense, satire, sarcasm, and cynicism*) by condensing the literature from antiquity and analyzing the modern language. Two of these are relevant, namely *humor* and *satire*, and seven features were used to distinguish between the two (see Table 1).

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Thus, this understanding of “humor” is the basis for benevolent humor and it is transferred from a literary form (writings aimed at arousing sympathy for the incongruities of life) to the level of humorous responses of individuals. Likewise, satire (decrying what is bad at the societal level) is transformed to serve as a basis for corrective humor at the interpersonal level. While satire aims to decry the bad and foolish, and is a general “betterment of the world” (German: *Weltverbesserung*, Schmidt-Hidding, 1963, p. 50), the corrective humor of individuals will more often relate to fellow humans rather than larger groups and society. Also Sir Harold Nicolson (1956, p. 19) sums up the differences between humor and irony or satire. For him humor observes human frailty indulgently and without bothering to correct it. But irony and satire have a “nobler and more didactic purpose. Whereas irony—being critical and pessimistic—demonstrates the difference between the real and the ideal, humor—being uncritical and optimistic—either ignores the difference or pretends that it is not, after all, so very important.” (p. 19).

It should be noted that these are virtuous accentuations of other humor behaviors and hence overlaps with existing concepts of humor are expected but there will also be a “virtuous gap”. For example, sarcasm is used to mock people, as reflected in concepts of aggressive humor (Martin et al., 2003) and katagelasticism (i.e., the joy of laughing at others;

Ruch & Proyer, 2009). However, the corrective educational element is missing, as the mockery involved in corrective humor is for a good reason, it is measured and reflective. Martin et al. (2003) describe the aggressive humor style as mocking, criticizing, and offensive humor production directed at others, that is, humor is produced without taking other's reactions or feelings into account, or it is used to manipulate others. This does not include the motivation to better others, which might be the intention of a responsible leader. Likewise, katagelasticism involves the indulgence in mockery, but deriving pleasure is the motivation rather than the intent to better an insufficiency. Mockery existed before, but in corrective humor it is embedded into a form that is not for one's own pleasure (or the one of an audience) but a chance for others to correct wrong ideas or behaviors and to improve.

Likewise, laughing a lot, laughing under adversity, maintaining good humor when stressed, and entertaining others have good effects on the self and others, but are not necessarily driven by love of others and humanity. The study by Beermann and Ruch (2009a) showed that in current humor instruments some scales relate to virtue but typically only a few have items with an identifiable virtuous content, and the rated level of virtue is small. It is comparatively strong in the humor subscale of a wisdom instrument (62.5% of the items), socially warm humor style (33.3%), affiliative humor (25.0%), trait cheerfulness (4/20 items; 20.0%), humor as a character strength (2/10 items; 20.0%), and enjoyment of humor (1/5 items; 20.0%). Surprisingly, no item of the subscale laughing at oneself of McGhee's Sense of Humor Scale (1999) was classified as virtuous although all items were considered to be of positive valence. Thus, it seems fruitful to pick up the study of benevolent and corrective humor to see whether or not they add something meaningful to humor research.

Recently, Ruch (2012) generated a set of statements for assessing benevolent and corrective humor (called humor and moral mockery in his study) and studied them in relation to a four factor-model of humor comprising socially warm humor, mean-spirited/earthly

humor, inept humor, and reflective humor. These items were based on the descriptions of humor and satire as provided by Schmidt-Hidding (1963; see Table 1). It turned out that the statements of both scales shared the reflective humor style (i.e., both contain finding incongruities in everyday life), which was even more strongly involved in benevolent humor ( $N = 706$  adults) than in moral mockery ( $N = 225$ ). Both also correlated positively with the socially warm humor style, confirming that both are interactional. While benevolent humor was negatively correlated with ineptness of humor, moral mockery additionally had consistently high correlations with mean-spirited humor. Thus, benevolent humor seems to be more than affiliative/socially warm humor; there are also reflective and competent elements. Likewise, corrective humor is more than mean-spirited/earthy, it has a socially warm and a reflective element. These findings did extend to each of the 12 statements written in this experimental form (listed in Table 2). However, there was no testing of the homogeneity of the statements or their factor structure. Most importantly, the gap between personality-based and character-based humor conceptualizations was not explicitly measured and validated.

### **Aim of the Present Study**

First, it will be examined whether a two factor-structure can be found in statements relating to benevolent and corrective humor in a principal component analysis (PCA). Second, it will be examined whether these two scales do overlap with other humor scales (benevolent humor with sense of humor and corrective humor with mockery, respectively) only to a moderate extent and whether the incremental variance is also the one in which the goodness lies; for example, while mockery itself should not correlate positively with the good character, corrective humor (and in particular the residuum after partialling out mockery) should. Likewise, benevolent humor should transcend the effects of the sense of humor in relation to character strengths. Humor was numerically shown most often in the virtues wisdom, courage, humanity and transcendence, and satire in the virtues courage and justice.



Content-wise, we expect the strongest overlaps of benevolent humor with the character strengths of wisdom, humanity, justice, courage and transcendence due to the reflective, competent, and socially warm elements and because they aim at the good and because they were found to be used with the comic style humor (Beermann & Ruch, 2009b). Corrective humor should go along with strengths of justice and courage, as one needs to honestly and bravely voice one's moral criticisms and as satire was implicated in these two virtues (Beermann & Ruch, 2009b). As former instruments of the sense of humor were found to be most compatible with humanity and wisdom (Beermann & Ruch, 2009a, 2009b; Müller & Ruch, 2011), the element of justice, transcendence, and courage would be unique to benevolent and corrective humor, thus representing the virtue gap.

## **Materials and Methods**

### **Participants**

A total of 340 German-speaking volunteers (36.2% men) with a mean age 40.84 ( $SD = 13.09$ ) ranging from 18 to 72 years provided valid responses in this study (11 were excluded because they showed anomalous answer patterns that deviated from all other participants, such as random or contradictory answering of one or several instruments). Participants were primarily German (71.2%), Swiss (17.9%), Austrian (7.4%), and from several other nations. Most participants were employed (75.6%) and well-educated, with 47.6% having more than 13 years of education, 21.8% having 12–13 years, 26.8% having 10–12 years, and 3.8% having a maximum of 9 years of education. A subsample of 144 participants with comparable descriptive properties as the overall sample also filled in the Sense of Humor Scale (McGhee, 1999).

### **Instruments**

**Statements of benevolent and corrective humor.** Following the definitions provided by Schmidt-Hidding (1963), six statements (Ruch, 2012) were written for

benevolent humor (e.g., “I accept the imperfection of human beings and my everyday life often gives me the opportunity to smile benevolently about it.”) and corrective humor (e.g., “When fellow humans or institutions demonstrate their superiority unjustified, I use biting humor to belittle them.”). The 12 statements are presented in Table 2. They were answered on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

**Values in Action-Inventory of Strengths.** The Values in Action-Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; German version by Ruch et al., 2010) measures 24 rationally derived character strengths, which are related to the six ubiquitous virtues (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence). The instrument employs 240 items (10 for each strength; e.g., “I try to add some humor to whatever I do.” for humor) with a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very much unlike me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). Its reliability (internal consistency and stability) and construct validity have been supported (e.g., Buschor, Proyer, & Ruch, 2013; Ruch et al., 2010). Cronbach’s alpha ranged from .72 (fairness) to .90 (religiousness/spirituality) with a median of .78 (mean inter-item correlations ranged from .21 to .47) in the present study.

**SHS.** The SHS (McGhee, 1999) measures playfulness vs. seriousness, good vs. bad mood, and the six components of the sense of humor. Sample items of these components are “It is important for me to have a lot of humor in my life.” (enjoyment of humor), “I have a good belly laugh many times each day.” (laughter), “I often tell jokes.” (verbal humor), “I often find humor in things that happen at work.” (humor in everyday life), “I find it easy to laugh when I am the butt of the joke.” (laughing at yourself), and “My sense of humor rarely abandons me under stress.” (humor under stress). We employed the 24 sense of humor items (4 for each facet) with a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The sum across the six components represents the total sense of humor

score (McGhee, 1999). Cronbach's alpha was .90 (mean inter-item correlation = .29) and the mean was 111.09 ( $SD = 19.54$ ) in the present study.

**Mockery scale.** Following the four humor factors identified by Ruch (2012), six items were devised that assess mockery (called "mean-spirited / earthy humor" in his model). A sample item is "I make sarcastic comments that may contain a trace of malevolence." They are answered with a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha was .82 (mean inter-item correlation = .43) and the mean was 3.73 ( $SD = 1.25$ ) in the present study.

### Procedure

The data were collected on a website for research purposes ([www.charakterstaerken.org](http://www.charakterstaerken.org); hosted by the institution that conducted the present study). This website hosts research instruments related to positive psychology, personality, and humor. The website has been promoted by different means, such as press coverage, a description with the link on the website of the institution, and contacting special groups to obtain heterogeneous samples. Also regular newsletters are sent to inform registered participants about new questionnaires on the website. The only general selection criteria for participants are an age of at least 18 years and a reasonable command of German. Participants who filled in the VIA-IS, the SHS, the mockery scale, and the statements of benevolent and corrective humor between January 2012 and March 2015 were included in the present study. Participants received an automated and personalized feedback after they completed each questionnaire.

**Data analysis.** First, a PCA was employed to test (a) whether the statements loaded on two components, and (b) whether the two components were sufficiently independent from one another. The preconditions for conducting a PCA were met as indicated by a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value of .85 and a significant Bartlett's test ( $p < .001$ ). The suitability of the

single statements for the PCA was confirmed by the measures of sampling adequacy being  $> .80$  for all statements. Second, correlations of benevolent and corrective humor with the SHS and mockery were computed. Third, two standard multiple regressions were computed to determine how much variance can be explained by the SHS and mockery in benevolent and corrective humor. Fourth, the humor scales were correlated with the 24 VIA-IS character strengths. Fifth, two hierarchical regression analyses with benevolent and corrective humor as criteria were computed, predictors being the demographic variables (age and sex) added in step 1, SHS or mockery added in step 2, and the 24 VIA-IS scales added in a stepwise procedure in the remaining steps (to avoid multicollinearity).

## Results

### PCA of the Benevolent and Corrective Humor Statements

A PCA (based on the covariance matrix) of the 12 benevolent and corrective humor statements resulted in the extraction of two components, as suggested by the scree test (the first four eigenvalues being 8.79, 3.57, 1.82, and 1.67) and the minimum average partial test (using the SPSS syntax provided by O'Connor, 2000). The two factors were expected to correlate and thus an oblimin rotation was employed ( $r = .32$ ). The rescaled loadings (pattern matrix), communalities, and rotation sums of squared loadings of these two oblimin-rotated components are presented in Table 2.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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As shown in Table 2, the statements loaded as expected on the two components (all loadings  $\geq .40$ ), with the median of the main loadings being .72 for of benevolent and .74 for corrective humor. Only one benevolent and one corrective humor statement showed second loadings  $\geq .30$ , and the medians of the second loadings were .01 and .02 for benevolent and corrective humor, respectively. Similar findings were obtained for the rescaled correlations in the structure matrix. Communalities indicated that between 36 and 65% of the variance in the

statements were explained by the two components (median 54.5%). The overall explained variance by the two components was 53.9%.

### **Correlations with Sense of Humor and Mockery**

We expected that benevolent and corrective humor correlate positively with the sense of humor (SHS) and mockery, respectively. However, as the former add a virtuous element to humor, the reliable variance in the two constructs should not be fully explained by their non-virtuous counterparts. As expected, benevolent humor correlated positively with the SHS ( $r = .56, p < .001$ ) and corrective humor correlated positively with mockery ( $r = .52, p < .001$ ). Small to medium correlations were also observed between benevolent humor and mockery ( $r = .16, p < .01$ ) and between corrective humor and the SHS ( $r = .27, p < .001$ ). Standard multiple regressions ( $n = 144$ ) revealed that the SHS and mockery together explained 32.5% of the reliable variance in benevolent humor ( $R^2 = .27$ , Cronbach's alpha = .82), with the standardized regression weights being  $\beta = .51$  ( $t = 7.04, p < .001$ ) for the SHS and  $\beta = .00$  for mockery ( $t = 0.01, p = .995$ ). For corrective humor, 42.7% of the reliable variance was explained ( $R^2 = .36$ , Cronbach's alpha = .84), with  $\beta = .18$  ( $t = 2.61, p = .010$ ) for the SHS and  $\beta = .55$  for mockery ( $t = 7.98, p < .001$ ). Thus, although the sense of humor and mockery explained a large amount of variance, almost two-thirds of the reliable variance in benevolent and corrective humor remained unexplained.

### **Relations to the VIA-IS Character Strengths: Verifying and Closing the Virtue Gap**

Next we turn to the relationships between humor and virtues. Table 3 shows the correlations of the SHS, benevolent humor, mockery, and corrective humor with the 24 VIA-IS character strengths.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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Sense of humor correlated significantly positively with 16 of the 24 strengths, with a median of .24. Benevolent humor correlated significantly positively with 20 of the 24

strengths with a median of .28. Mockery had only one significant positive correlation and 20 significant negative correlations (highest for forgiveness, modesty, and prudence) with the character strengths, with a median of -.17. Corrective humor correlated significantly and positively with 3 of the 24 strengths (creativity, bravery, and humor,) with a median of .01.

More importantly, we expected that benevolent and corrective humor would be significantly related to some of VIA-IS character strengths *over and above* the SHS and mockery, respectively. This would empirically support the postulated “virtue gap”. Table 4 shows the hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting benevolent and corrective humor with age and gender (Step 1), the SHS and mockery (Step 2), and the 24 VIA-IS strengths in a stepwise fashion.

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Insert Table 4 about here

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As shown in Table 4, benevolent humor was uniquely explained by five strengths over and above demographics and the SHS (16.9% explained variance,  $p < .001$ ). Significant strengths were forgiveness, which fits to the core of benevolent humor (forgiving other’s weaknesses), love of learning, hope, humor, and zest (negatively due to a suppressor effect as the zero-order correlation was positive,  $r = .25$ ,  $p = .002$ ). Thus benevolent humor had unique relations to several virtues (wisdom, temperance, and transcendence).

Corrective humor was uniquely explained by three character strengths (5.4% of explained variance,  $p < .001$ ), namely bravery, fairness, and love of learning. This is consistent with our predictions: The virtuous gap consists of observing incongruities of life (as opposed to deriving fun from jokes or mishaps of others) (predicted by strengths of wisdom), the decision to correct others but still in a humorous way (involving courage) and to establish equilibrium by doing so (involving justice).

## Discussion

The present study aimed at exploring two kinds of humor aiming at the good. The usefulness of a set of 12 statements to assess benevolent and corrective humor was supported in a PCA. Although the two components were moderately interrelated, they were separable and yielded distinct and expected correlates with demographic variables, sense of humor, mockery, and character strengths.

The virtue-related kinds of humor correlated as expected with sense of humor (mainly benevolent humor) and mockery (mainly corrective humor), suggesting that these behaviors already exist without the virtuous influence. In other words, individuals doing corrective humor also tend to engage in mockery. However, most importantly, benevolent and corrective humor went beyond these humor constructs, and these differences seemed due to virtues. Thus, humor skills (as depicted in the SHS) are used not only to observe incongruities in everyday life (created by human weaknesses and the imperfection of the world) but also entail its acceptance and a non-critical and benevolent humorous treatment, and mockery skills are used to fight badness and mediocrity, and the ridicule of vice, folly, abuse, and shortcomings intends to shame individuals and groups into improvement. These results give rise to the idea that existing humor behaviors (mockery/laughing at, fun/laughing with others) may have been molded in history to form virtuous offspring in the form of benevolent and corrective humor, respectively. The strengths filling the “virtue gap” relate positively to the virtues of wisdom, justice, temperance, transcendence, and courage. Love of learning (a marker of wisdom and knowledge) was entailed in both benevolent and corrective humor, while forgiveness, hope, and humor were unique to benevolent humor. These predictors are compatible with the view that incongruities in life have to be detected (requires cognitive strengths), and the listed strengths representing temperance and transcendence are involved in forgiving people, hoping that things better without correction and a temperate humorous treatment is most appropriate. Having identified wrongdoings and shortcomings, a

sense of fairness/justice will motivate corrective humor and bravery will be needed to express this critique. Indeed the three strengths of fairness, bravery, and love of learning markedly differentiate corrective humor from simply liking to criticize, mock, or make fun of others.

Importantly, studying virtue-related humor goes beyond conceptualizing humor from a well-being perspective (cf. Martin et al., 2003). Moral-based humor showed its importance theoretically in the historical treatment of the term humor and empirically by uniquely relating to several virtues. Similarly, it extends—both in theory and in practice—humor concepts that were derived from well-being approaches, such as the humor styles postulated by Martin et al. (2003). In unpublished analyses ( $N = 354$ ; Ruch & Heintz, 2015), we found that the four humor styles explained less than two-thirds and one-third of the reliable variance in benevolent and corrective humor, respectively. Thus, virtue-related forms of humor are both relevant and novel, but have thus far been ignored by psychologists.

All in all, the present study confirms that humor cannot only be seen as a temperament, personality trait, or way of coping with stress but also as a morally guided behavior. This marks the beginning of a new line of research where humor and positive psychology are more merged and where the different virtues are combined with humor behavior. Although in the present study two such morally good forms of humor are distinguished, future studies might identify more of them. Morreall (2011) and Beermann and Ruch (2009a, 2009b) show further virtues that may affect humor experience and production.

### **Limitations**

The 12 statements to measure benevolent and corrective humor need to undergo further psychometric testing (especially with regards to validity) to determine their suitability to adequately measure the two virtue-related humor concepts. The present study thus does not present a final scale to measure benevolent and corrective humor, but a starting point for a solid scale construction process. Also replications and extensions of the present findings with



other cultures, population groups, and measures are desirable. Although the overall sample was sufficiently large, the findings involving the SHS were based on a subsample of only 144 participants.

### **Future Directions**

The present study shows that there are still areas in humor research that are underexplored, and the first attempt to close this “virtue gap” provides a promising new area to explore humor from a positive psychological perspective. Broadening humor research with plurality in theories, constructs, and methods can help to advance our understanding of what humor is and which role it plays in our everyday lives. The extent to which humor overlaps with virtues should also be tested by other means, such as actual virtuous humor behaviors, peer-ratings of virtuous instances, or experimental tasks that tap into the strengths and virtues. Given that these two kinds of humor aim at the good, it would be interesting to test the outcome that is associated when this humor is shown. For example, does corrective humor actually improve the wrongdoings that it is targeting, and—if so—under which circumstances does it lead to behavior change? And how do others—especially the “target”—recognize and interpret the morally good intent underlying benevolent and corrective humor?

### **Practical Applications**

Although the psychometric properties of the statements for benevolent and corrective humor should be more thoroughly investigated before firm implications can be drawn, some practical benefits can be highlighted. The two virtue-related humor constructs can be a valuable addition to humor trainings, which typically do not consider these components. In fact mastering these two facets of humor can be helpful to many; corrective humor is a good means to highlight wrongdoings in a sociable constructive way for all that are responsible for others (e.g., at the workplace, at school, or in the family) and benevolent humor generally will help boosting a positive social interaction. These facets could also be implemented in

positive psychological interventions, indicating a possible means by which character strengths might be fostered. In contrast to discouraging people from using aggressive forms of humor, corrective humor can help to criticize wrong behavior and shortcomings constructively and to help improving others. It is important not to see humor from a “black-and-white” perspective (like “positive” vs. “negative” humor styles), but to consider that humor can be just, kind, criticizing, and wise simultaneously. Importantly, benevolent and corrective humor transcend the notions of other conceptualizations of the sense of humor and humor styles and thus broaden the variety of humor that can be studied and applied within the framework of positive psychology.

### **Conclusions**

The emergence of positive psychology was beneficial for humor research in as much as it draws attention to virtuous aspects of humor. The present study adds two new facets to the domain of humor that might be relevant when the causes or consequences of virtuous forms of humor are investigated. These two facets are meant to supplement the existing concepts but not replacing any. Interestingly, the VIA-IS scale humor already accounts for some—but not all—of the gap between sense of humor and benevolent humor, but it does not contribute to corrective humor in the sense of reducing the gap between mockery and corrective humor. Considering that Beermann and Ruch (2009a, 2009b) found each of the six virtues studied (i.e., wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, transcendence) to be compatible with humor, we can assume that there are more virtue-guided forms of humor yet to be explored by and used in humor research.

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Table 1

*Descriptions of Humor and Satire Utilizing Seven Features*

Features	Humor	Satire
Intention, Goal	To arouse sympathy and an understanding for the incongruities of life	To decry bad and foolish people, to improve the world
Object	Creation in all its forms; human and real issues	Moral world as a measure of the real one
Attitude of the agent as subject	Distant, affirmative, conciliatory, tolerant, love of the individual creation	Superior, critical, often negative, strained
Behavior towards other people	Understanding, benignly including oneself in judgments	Detecting weaknesses, aggressive
Ideal audience	Jovial, relaxed, contemplative	People with a critical mindset
Method	Realistic observation	Disclosing the true circumstances in an allegory, e.g. depicting an ideal world in an animal fable
Linguistic peculiarities	Ambiguous, without punch line; first-person narration preferred; dialects and professional jargon	Utopia, parody, caricature; ironic

*Note.* Adapted and translated from Schmidt-Hidding (1963, pp. 50–51).

Table 2

*Principal Component Analysis with Oblimin Rotation of the 12 Benevolent and Corrective Humor Statements (Pattern Matrix)*

	BEN	COR	$h^2$
I am a realistic observer of human weaknesses, and my good-natured humor treats them benevolently	<b>.59</b>	.02	.36
When my humor is aimed at human weaknesses, I include both myself and others	<b>.40</b>	.38	.40
On a large and small scale, the world is not perfect, but with a humorous outlook on the world I can amuse myself at the adversities of life	<b>.75</b>	-.03	.55
I accept the imperfection of human beings and my everyday life often gives me the opportunity to smile benevolently about it	<b>.83</b>	-.11	.65
Humor is suitable for arousing understanding and sympathy for imperfections and the human condition	<b>.69</b>	.02	.48
Even when facing unpleasant events I can keep my distance and discover something amusing or funny in it	<b>.75</b>	.04	.58
I have a critical attitude toward arrogant and unfair people and my mockery serves to establish equality and justice	-.01	<b>.69</b>	.47
I parody people's bad habits to fight the bad and foolish behavior.	-.15	<b>.84</b>	.64
When fellow humans or institutions demonstrate their superiority unjustified, I use biting humor to belittle them	.03	<b>.78</b>	.62
I caricature my fellow humans' wrongdoings in a funny way to gently urge them to change	.30	<b>.50</b>	.44
I like to ridicule moral badness to induce or increase a critical attitude in other people	-.13	<b>.83</b>	.63
If the circumstances are not as they actually should be, I poke fun at these moral transgressions or societal wrongdoings, hoping to improve them in the long term	.17	<b>.66</b>	.54
RSSL	3.40	3.69	

*Note.*  $N = 340$ . Loadings  $\geq .40$  marked in bold. BEN = benevolent humor; COR = corrective humor; RSSL = rotation sums of squared loadings;  $h^2$  = communalities.

Table 3

*Pearson Correlations of the Sense of Humor Scale, Benevolent Humor, Mockery, and Corrective Humor With the 24 VIA-IS Character Strengths*

VIA-IS scales	SHS	BEN	Mockery	COR
Creativity	.28***	.26***	.05	.15**
Curiosity	.22**	.38***	-.20***	.03
Open-mindedness	.03	.19***	-.11*	.04
Love of learning	.22**	.35***	-.14*	.10
Perspective	.19*	.29***	-.06	.08
Bravery	.31***	.36***	-.01	.18***
Persistence	.14	.06	-.20***	-.05
Authenticity	.14	.14**	-.14*	.06
Zest	.42***	.27***	-.14**	.00
Love	.31***	.22***	-.17**	-.06
Kindness	.31***	.28***	-.11*	.03
Social intelligence	.25**	.31***	-.12*	-.01
Teamwork	.29***	.15**	-.18***	-.02
Fairness	.15	.28***	-.16**	.08
Leadership	.33***	.29***	-.16**	.06
Forgiveness	.23**	.30***	-.28***	-.04
Modesty	-.03	.00	-.28***	-.09
Prudence	-.05	.01	-.28***	-.06
Self-regulation	.09	.08	-.26***	-.05
Beauty and excellence	.02	.16**	-.18***	.01
Gratitude	.30***	.32***	-.20***	.00
Hope	.39***	.35***	-.18***	-.03
Humor	.74***	.50***	.15**	.23***
Religiousness	.36***	.22***	-.24***	-.02
Median <i>r</i>	.24	.28	-.17	.01

*Note.* *N* = 340 (*n* = 144 for the SHS). Beauty and excellence refers to an appreciation of beauty and excellence. BEN = benevolent humor; COR = corrective humor; SHS = Sense of Humor Scale; VIA-IS = Values in Action–Inventory of Strengths.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 4

*Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Benevolent and Corrective Humor with Age and Gender (Step 1), the Sense of Humor Scale and Mockery (in Step 2) and the 24 VIA-IS Strengths (Entered in a Stepwise Fashion; Only Last Step Reported)*

Predictor	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	95% CI of <i>B</i>	<i>r</i>
Benevolent humor ( <i>n</i> = 144)					
Step 1	.04				
Age		.17*	0.01	[0.00; 0.02]	.18*
Gender		.08	0.13	[-0.16; 0.43]	.10
Step 2	.28***				
Sense of humor		.53***	0.02	[0.02; 0.03]	.52***
Last step	.17***				
Forgiveness		.15*	0.24	[0.00; 0.48]	.40***
Love of learning		.21**	0.32	[0.09; 0.56]	.39***
Zest		-.48***	-0.64	[-0.93; -0.36]	.25**
Hope		.36***	0.46	[0.20; 0.73]	.41***
Humor		.22*	0.30	[0.02; 0.58]	.46***
Total $R^2$	.48***				
Corrective humor ( <i>n</i> = 340)					
Step 1	.03**				
Age		-.07	-0.01	[-0.02; 0.00]	-.09
Gender		-.14*	-0.31	[-0.56; -0.07]	-.14**
Step 2	.30***				
Mockery		.59***	0.53	[0.44; 0.61]	.56***
Last step	.05***				
Bravery		.10*	0.22	[0.02; 0.43]	.18***
Fairness		.10*	0.26	[0.03; 0.50]	.08
Love of learning		.11*	0.20	[0.02; 0.38]	.10
Total $R^2$	.38***				

*Note.* CI = confidence interval; VIA-IS = Values in Action–Inventory of Strengths; *r* = zero-order correlations.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .